

# LOS ANGELES COUNTY VETERANS ADVISORY COMMISSION

1816 S. FIGUEROA STREET  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90015



Ruth A. Wong  
Director

## MINUTES REGULAR MEETING Wednesday, September 9, 2020

### Present:

#### Commissioners

Hector Elizalde  
Tess Banko  
Joe Leal  
Brittanie Moore  
Patricia Jackson-Kelley  
Dennis Tucker  
Thomas O'Shaughnessy  
Ruel Fuentecilla  
Tom Lasser  
Michael McDowell

### Absent:

#### Commissioners

### County Department Military and Veterans Affairs

Ruth Wong, Director  
Stephanie Guerrero, Secretary

### Call to Order and Pledge of Allegiance

Chair Hector Elizalde called the meeting to order at 1: 32 p.m. The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Commissioner Brittanie Moore, 1<sup>st</sup> District.

### Roll Call

There was a total of ten Commissioners at the meeting; quorum present.

### Approval of Minutes

Motion made by Commissioner Thomas O'Shaughnessy to accept the Minutes for July 8, 2020 and seconded by Commissioner Michael McDowell. With no objections, motion passed.

## **Chairman's Report**

Chair Hector Elizalde gave a warm welcome and opened up a discussion to determine if there are any amendments on the following documents:

- Strategic Plan 2020-2021
- Annual Report 2019-2020
- Ordinance
- Bylaws
- Veteran of the Year Nomination Form
- Orientation / Incoming Checklist

Motion made by Commissioner Ruel Fuentecilla to accept the Strategic Plan 2020-2021 and seconded by Commissioner Thomas O'Shaughnessy. With no objections, motion passed.

Chair Hector Elizalde stated that each Commissioner is to submit their activity report for the past fiscal year so that the Annual Report 2019-2020 can be finalized and sent to the Board of Supervisors. Commissioners Thomas O'Shaughnessy, Tess Banko, and Patricia Jackson-Kelley provided some amendments that will be changed and/or added to the Annual Report.

Commissioner Joe Leal inquired about the mileage reimbursement for events/activities. Chair Hector Elizalde made a request to receive a copy of the mileage form to see what information is required. He advised the commission that it is at their discretion to use the mileage form when attending veterans related events representing their district as a Commissioner. Most importantly, if attending a veteran event as a commissioner, it should be noted as activity for the annual report regardless if claiming mileage or not.

Commissioners Joe Leal and Michael McDowell inquired about receiving a county email due to privacy concerns. Chair Hector Elizalde has requested that the commission receive a county email for privacy purposes. Director Ruth Wong confirmed that a county email is only issued to county employees, however, will look into it and give an update at the next meeting.

## **Building and Tenant Update**

Commissioner Thomas O'Shaughnessy reported the following on Bob Hope Patriotic Hall:

For the month of August, Bob Hope Patriotic Hall (Hall) remains closed due to COVID-19 protocols. The Reconstitution plans for reopening the Hall has been submitted to the County's CEO office. To date, there is currently no set date for reopening the Hall yet. Reconstitution meetings continue via Microsoft Teams each Tuesday at 2:30 P.M. All outdoor and indoor cameras are working. The leak at the entry to the Purple Heart Inn has been submitted for repair to ISD. Currently there is no participants in the Safe Parking program. The Hall has been selected as a voting site for the upcoming Presidential elections.

## **Mentor Program and Orientation/Incoming Checklist**

Commissioner Dennis Tucker appreciated the great dialogue in the discussion and is happy with the final product. Commissioner Tom Lasser suggested that page 10 of the Strategic Plan be added to the Orientation/Incoming Checklist. Chair Hector Elizalde stated that the document will be reviewed when it is finalized.

Motion made by Commissioner Joe Leal to accept the Orientation/Incoming Checklist with revisions and seconded by Commissioner Michael McDowell. With no objections, motion passed.

The final copy will be sent to all commissioners.

## **Approve VAC Ordinance**

The Ordinance was read aloud by Chair Hector Elizalde. Commissioner Tom Lasser recommended that the title of the document be changed to include Ordinance. Chair Hector Elizalde stated that the commission will need to take a vote on

the Ordinance with the amendment made by Commissioner Lasser. Commissioner O'Shaughnessy requested a roll call for the vote.

Motion made by Commissioner Thomas O'Shaughnessy to accept the newest Ordinance with revisions and seconded by Commissioner Tom Lasser. All in favor through roll call, motion passed.

## **Bylaws**

Director Ruth Wong stated that Commissioner Tom Lasser submitted a draft. Commissioner Lasser confirmed that the draft was turned in to Director Ruth Wong who then updated it on March 10, 2020. He shared it months ago as a progress report and commended Commissioner O'Shaughnessy who took the initiative to produce the second draft. In order to track the progress, he suggests that today's date be attached to the second draft. He will continue to monitor it and make it a workable document.

Chair Hector Elizalde stated that the goal to finalize the Bylaws at October's meeting. Commissioners Lasser and O'Shaughnessy have taken the lead on this assignment, therefore, he asked each commissioner to review and see if it meets with their approval. He requested that if any changes need to be made, that they be sent to him in order to incorporate them into the final product. The second draft of the Los Angeles Veterans Advisory Commission Bylaws will be dated September 9, 2020.

## **Veteran of the Year Nomination Form**

The Veteran of the Year will not be held this year. The Board of Supervisors are not conducting any ceremonial events during the Board Meeting; at which time is when the Veteran of the Year would be recognized and presented with a scroll. Such presentations are on hold until further notice, therefore, the commission will not move forward with this. It would give some time to establish some guidelines with minimal requirements that the Veteran of the Year program should meet. Will proceed to get it approved so that we are ready by next year.

Commissioner Tom Lasser stated that Supervisor Janice Hahn confirmed that the Veterans Day LA event will not be held at the Coliseum this year.

## **US Postal Service (Veterans Services)**

Commissioner Thomas O'Shaughnessy stated that Robert McKendrick was invited as one of the guest speakers who will then address the delivery of the prescription medications and other matters.

## **Guest Speakers**

Robert McKendrick, Executive Director of the Community Engagement and Reintegration Services was introduced by Commissioner Thomas O'Shaughnessy. Robert thanked Commissioner O'Shaughnessy for the opportunity to discuss how the pharmacy is operating during this challenging period of COVID-19 and mail delivery. Joining him are Frank Bertone, Chief of Pharmacy along with colleagues Allison Norton and Diane Valdez, Managers of Outpatient Services of the Greater LA Healthcare System. When requesting prescriptions, refills can be ordered by phone at (800) 952-4852, online at MyHealtheVet.com, refill slips returned to the pharmacy received by mail or pick up in person at the VA site. The VA sites with a pharmacy are West LA main hospital, downtown at Temple Street, Sepulveda, and Bakersfield. There are two options veterans can receive their prescriptions, one by pick at the pharmacy and the other by mail. The VA sends out a survey to veterans called VA signals for in person or a separate one for mail service so that veterans can provide feedback with concerns or compliments. The survey shows that the area of concern and recommendations to improve their experience is mail delivery. For mail concerns, veterans may contact the call center and request for window pick up or overnight shipping data tracking prescriptions through mail. A few things the VA is doing to mitigate/prevent mail issues caused by delays or packages not being delivered, is that CMOP pre-sorts all mail on behalf of USPS to decrease processing time and continues to monitor and explore options.

Commissioner Tom Lasser sought if the Long Beach VA is the same process as West Los Angeles VA. Robert assured him that the Long Beach VA CMOP is exactly the same. Commissioner Tess Banko wanted to know where can veterans

get prescriptions filled when not visiting the VA. Allison Norton answered with a few options, such as CMOP providing a temporary supply, Urgent Care, and emergency pharmacists as well. If veterans received care in the community, the provider can send it electronically, fax it, or veteran can bring it to the VA Pharmacy to be filled. A list of Urgent Care contracted community pharmacy's can be found at <https://www.va.gov/find-locations/>.

Commissioner Thomas O'Shaughnessy asked Robert to send the names of the staff so that the Veterans Advisory Commission can send a thank you letter. Lastly, Chair Hector Elizalde thanked Robert and offered him the full support of the Veterans Advisory Commission.

Tara Hunter, Directing Attorney, Los Angeles County Bar Association was introduced by Commissioner Dennis Tucker. Tara thanked Commissioner Tucker for the introduction and the opportunity to share about the services LACBA provides to veterans. She stated that the Veterans Services Legal Project was founded in 2014 by the LACBA Arms Forces Community looking to use legal expertise and give back to the veteran community for free. Pre-pandemic, the overall mission is to remove legal obstacles that get in the way of employment, housing, education, and overall wellbeing of veterans. LACBA was primarily operating at Bob Hope Patriotic Hall, in conjunction with U.S.Vets while offering monthly clinics providing record clearing service, along with East LA Vet Center and West LA Vet Center to try to meet the needs of veterans. The services that are currently offered are:

- Self Help Model – Resolving Outstanding Tickets and Warrants, Reinstating California Driver's Licenses, and Expunging Criminal Convictions
- Referrals for Pro Bono Representation – Upgrading Discharge Status, Family Law, and Estate Planning
- Self Help and Pro Bono Representation – LEAP, LACBA's Entrepreneurial Assistance Program

Commissioner Tom Lasser inquired if expunging criminal convictions include felonies. Tara answered yes it includes felony convictions, misdemeanor convictions, and requests to determine probation. LACBA is stationed in LA County, the headquarters is on 7<sup>th</sup> Street opposite of the 110 freeway. Before the pandemic, LACBA was providing office hours with U.S.Vets on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9a-12p at Patriotic Hall.

Commissioner Dennis Tucker asked Tara if she could share her relationship with Jodi. Tara stated that all open cases, such as DUI or a drug related cases are referred to Jodi for legal guidance. He thanked her for a very important matter.

Commissioner Tess Banko announced that the VCA Stand Down will be on November 10, 2020.

### **Public Comments**

Keisha Dixon addressed the Commission regarding Family Law and Veterans Court. She is concerned that an issue was not properly taken care of while she was on deployment in Iraq and has been dealing with family law issues for 16 years. Her case has been in the court for 11 years. September 28 is her next court date, only to find out what school her children are attending because they have been alienated during COVID without visitation. She asked, "When will JAG and/or Veterans Court implement Family Law to protect single parent soldiers and their children?"

Chair Hector Elizalde responded that it is a legal matter referring to appropriate legal representation; must be handled by the court system. There is nothing in the Commissions purview that can address the situation that veterans face in family court. This has been reviewed with County Counsel and determined that the case needs to be handled through the court system with legal representation. He stated that this is the result after a year of research.

Angelica Escalante, TELACU Veterans Upward Bound, stated that the program will start up again in the Fall 2020 on October 7<sup>th</sup> via Zoom. A flyer will be sent to Stephanie Guerrero for distribution. During Spring and Summer, it was determined that veterans were unable to take all three classes because of Zoom fatigue, therefore, classes will be broken down into one or two classes. Classes will continue online for the Fall 2020 and Winter 2021 sessions, and if all goes well, the program will be back in Spring 2021. The classes offered are Computer, Math, and English. TELACU is now working with U.S.Vets- Outside the Wire to promote check up from the neck up, Mental Health online classes, and CSULA for online campus field trips. Online classes opened up to all veterans and reservists who live in California which has been beneficial to the older generation in learning how to use Zoom and navigate technology. Chair Hector Elizalde thanked Angelica and all staff for doing a great job.

## **Department of Military and Veterans Affairs Report**

Ruth Wong, Director, provided the following updates:

Operation Welcome Home – The purpose of this program is to welcome home individuals that have been away serving our country and to offer assistance with benefits and services. MVA has mailed out more than 1,000 packets with welcome home letters and of that, 11 claims have been developed; we are also contacting them by phone.

Collaboration with Veteran Benefits Administration – Virtual meeting held with Emmett O'Meara and his team at VBA, including CALVET, DMH, and DMVA. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss how we are taking care of veterans through teleworking.

75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of World War II – Commemorate service that will tell the story of the sacrifice and serve as a legacy for their children, grandchildren and future generations. Identified WW II veterans from five service branches, contract with County Channel to produce video; scheduling interviews with final product in time for Veteran's Day.

Department staff vacancies – Working to fill vacant positions due to retirements, other opportunities, and medical leaves.

Remote Civil Service Exam – Developing a remote reservist testing and exam policy because most wait until they return from deployment. The goal is to develop a protocol allowing the reservist the option of taking the civil service exam online.

Vanessa Guillen Bill – In response to the murder of Vanessa Guillen, US Army soldier assigned to Ft. Hood, we are working with our legislative advocates in Washington D.C. and the CEO and following a Bill that is being prepared by Congresswomen Sylvia Garcia's office in Houston, Texas. This Bill will report abuse outside the chain of command. We do expect some push back from the third party, however, we are keeping a close eye on this piece of legislation so we may add Los Angeles County's support once this Bill is ready.

County veteran employee assistance program – Working with DHR, the Occupational Health Program unit in crafting a veteran specific program that would offer a menu of resources including mental health.

Growing our reservist support program – The Sheriff has their own dedicated reservist administrative unit but other departments do not.

U.S. Space Force – A new branch of the military service. Currently the space force is looking for a location, potentially Palmdale. Supervisor Kathryn Barger sent a letter of support for Palmdale. The space command is currently located in Colorado Springs.

Voting Center at Patriotic Hall – Will be open on October 24 through November 3. The coordinator of MVA has asked if any Commissioners would like to volunteer time at the voting center. Volunteers are needed in the afternoon. If interested, please let us know.

Virtual Visit - On September 24, the BOS Quality and Productivity Commission will visit Patriotic Hall virtually. They gave permission to invite the Veterans Advisory Commissioners to be a part of the visit. If interested in participating, please let Stephanie Guerrero know and she will send you the Zoom meeting link. The purpose of the visit is to see how that commission can assist MVA by looking at the challenges and opportunities in advancing the quality and productivity in our department.

## **Homelessness Report**

Chair Hector Elizalde stated that there is a major concern about homeless veterans living in the San Gabriel riverbed. After connecting with LAHSA and the Sheriff's Department, he discovered that Project Room Key has been exhausted; there are no more rooms available for the homeless. Homeless shelters are at maximum capacity as well. The situation has gotten worse in the San Gabriel Valley.

## **Good of the Order**

Commissioner Joe Leal stated that veterans are taking their own lives. Suicide is real, often times, we only hear about it but we do not see it. He asked the commission to join him for a moment of silence for Ronnie McNutt, a veteran who recently committed suicide. Chair Hector Elizalde stated that this will be done at the end of the meeting during the adjournment.

Vice Chair Tess Banko announced that there is an Annual Suicide Prevention Summit taking place now. Commissioner Tom Lasser sent out a military flyer a Commemoration Ceremony with a Military and Veterans panel happening on Friday. She participates on the Mayor's Veterans Suicide Prevention Challenge. The VA is having a Community Drive Thru for the next three months beginning on September 21, 2020 where they hand out food and backpacks. TEAM (Transition Engagement and Mentoring) Groups are upcoming through the Veteran and Family Wellness Center (VFWC) for veterans and families. There is a Wellness and Recreation Day on September 19, 2020 with lots of new things to try. This year's Stand Down event, has been renamed as "Stand Out." The Stand Out event will be on November 10, 2020; the structure will be different, such as hubs and teams of professional going out into the community to reach veterans where they are.

Commissioner Brittanie Moore made an announcement on behalf of Supervisor Hilda Solis, 1<sup>st</sup> District will be having a Food Distribution in El Monte on September 11, 2020. The County has partnered with local businesses to deliver three free meals to elderly veterans.

Commissioner Tom Lasser stated that he wasn't aware that San Clemente Island is a part of LA County in the 4<sup>th</sup> District. In July, there was a naval accident where seven Marines and a sailor were killed in the amphibious assault vehicle. Three out of the seven Marines were from Southern California. There are 25 states that expressed interest in having the Space Force Headquarters.

Commissioner Michael McDowell stated that he is concerned about furloughs and the lack of tax revenue during this pandemic. With many businesses now going out of business, the county has experienced a shortfall in the budget. How is this going to affect the services for veterans and will any MVA staff be furloughed? Director Ruth Wong commented that it's a good question and thanked him for his concern. The good news is that the county has no curtailments or furloughs at this time, at least for now. In terms of the revenue regarding property tax and some sales tax, is looking better than initially projected. property tax. Commissioner McDowell stated that homelessness is not going to get better, therefore, we need to be ready to discuss it and find an alternative method in terms of support.

Commissioner Patricia Jackson-Kelley provided a written report that the Women's Program had an excellent presentation on suicide prevention.

Commissioner Dennis Tucker stated that Metro has partnered with MVA to provide healthcare training for veterans that will take place tomorrow Thursday, September 10, 2020. In partnership with the LA Sparks, there will be a Veterans and First Responders Night event tomorrow as well; flyer with details will be sent out. In terms of employment, Metro has hired about 17 veterans from micro transit with successful transition and onboarding starts early next month. Metro's CEO announced that a new exploratory tax force will begin developing a proposal called Fearless System Initiative; will provide updates without making any recommendations. Purple line extension with the VA is ongoing and will be implemented shortly. He asked the Chair to send out information about the Voting Center at Patriotic Hall because it is important to come out to vote and volunteer. Lastly, working on a Food Drive to giveaway turkeys in November.

Commissioner Fuentecilla stated that there will be a food drive in Norwalk, CA for the week of Veterans Day in November. With the permission of the Chair, he would like to volunteer to develop a draft of the Commissioners activity report to submit for review. If possible, may it be added to next month's agenda. Chair Hector Elizalde appreciates and welcomes Commissioner Fuentecilla to send over the draft for his review.

Chair Hector Elizalde stated that on November 10, 2020, there will be a Mental Health Consortium in association with Congresswoman Grace Napolitano. Congresswoman Napolitano has been doing this for over 20 years since she was in the state assembly; it ranges from 75-90 people every quarter. The Mental Health Consortium will be focused on veteran issues. An invite will be sent to Long Beach VA and the Department of Mental Health, VPAN. Director Ruth Wong will address the audience with information about the Veterans Advisory Commission. The presentation will be an hour long. He encourages the Commissioners to start doing joint presentations to provide information throughout the community for the Los Angeles County, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs.

Commissioner Thomas O'Shaughnessy shared that Supervisor Kathryn Barger, 5<sup>th</sup> District gave remarks about DMVA at the LA Veterans Collaborative. She also invited everyone to visit the Veterans Advisory Commission. The Space Force is something that we ought to push hard for Palmdale. Last, he reminded everyone that it is important to vote and gave an overview of the different ways to vote.

### **Adjournment**

Don Seki, US Army veteran passed away on July 28, 2020 at the VA Hospital in West Los Angeles. He was 97 years old and served in WW II as a rifleman with L Company of the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion of the famous Japanese American "Go for Broke" 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team. He lost his left arm due to machine gun fire in the Vosges Mountains area of France when his unit was rescuing the Texas Lost Battalion. He was decorated by Deputy Consul General Fabrice Maiolino at a ceremony in Los Angeles at the Go for Broke Monument on November 9, 2013 along with 10 other Japanese American veterans.

Marco Barranco, US Marine Corp veteran was killed in the San Clemente naval cleaning accident. His funeral service was held at Montebello Park. Chair Hector Elizalde would like to thank Supervisor Hilda Solis, 1<sup>st</sup> District who was represented by Antonio Chapa, Board Deputy, 1<sup>st</sup> District.

Jacob Blake, in Kenosha, Wisconsin was shot seven times and still in the hospital. Commissioner Dennis Tucker thanked everyone for their support in the Black Lives Matter movement.

A total of 26 participants in attendance. Meeting adjourned at 3:53 p.m.

Stephanie Guerrero  
Secretary  
September 9, 2020